

NEW KNOWLEDGE about Greece

This briefing note highlights NEW KNOWLEDGE about Greece.
We present here new knowledge and key messages for policy makers and civil society.

On-going project

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ACCOMMODATING ETHNIC, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN GREECE

Until 20 years ago, Greece was largely considered a mono-ethnic, mono-cultural and mono-religious country-- a true 'nation-state'. During the last two decades, however, Greece has become host to more than a million co-ethnic immigrants and foreigners accounting for more than 10% of the country's total resident population. Albanians, Romanians, Bulgarians, Ukrainians and Georgians, who form the oldest and largest immigrant groups in Greece, contributed to the country's cultural and linguistic diversity, while some of the more recently arrived groups, from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Afghanistan to its religious and racial diversity.

In spite of the significant change in the country's socio-demographic profile over these 20 years, there has been little effort to pro actively accommodate the de facto cultural, religious, ethnic and linguistic diversity of Greek society. The still dominant definition of national identity is conceived in rigid ethnocultural terms and is rather suspicious of minority and immigrant groups' presence and claims. The Greek state formally recognises only the existence of a religious Muslim minority in western Thrace, while the relatively large Roma population lives in the margins of all spheres of public life. In effect, minority and migrant communities tend to be regarded as 'foreigners', 'outsiders' to Greek society and without a 'legitimate' claim for accommodation of their cultural or religious diversity. The main concept adopted to deal with diversity is that of **integration**, which actually refers to **a one-way adaptation of immigrants to the host society**. **Cultural assimilation is often considered as the core end-goal of integration.**

The notion of **tolerance** –a concept or term seldom used either in political or in public discourse – **is understood in its minimal version, notably as refraining from interfering with practices, individuals or groups that one does not approve of.**

In the ACCEPT PLURALISM project, we examined **whether this dominant cultural assimilation discourse is accepted, challenged or rejected in practice** in two important fields, **education** and **political life**. In particular:

- We explored ethnic selection and informal segregation practices in schools which target Roma and migrant children;
- We examined how religious diversity is accommodated in school life and what room is accorded to minority religions; and
- We studied the ways in which ethnic and religious diversity is accommodated in the public sphere and in participation in the country's political life.

It is important to underline that the ACCEPT Pluralism fieldwork was conducted as Greece's

deepest economic, political, social and institutional crisis since the consolidation of democracy has been unfolding, significantly changing dynamics and hierarchies within society and thus the ways in which tolerance and intolerance are understood and expressed.

Evaluation of discourses and practices in our case studies:

	Institutional and legal framework	Practical situation	Public discourses
Ethnic selection/segregation in schools	Acceptance/Recognition	Minimal Tolerance	Tolerance but not Acceptance
Minority religions in schools	Minimal Tolerance	Tolerance	Tolerance and in some cases respect/acceptance
Ethnic and religious diversity in the public sphere and in politicse	Minimal Tolerance	Minimal tolerance	Between minimal tolerance and intolerance

SEGREGATION IN GREEK SCHOOLS

Greece has a public school system, with only a few private schools mainly in the country's urban centres, and no faith schools. The current educational system in Greece was set up after the end of the 1967-1974 military dictatorship. Segregation and discrimination are illegal and unconstitutional in Greece. Moreover, the Greek legislative framework guarantees the right to public education for all children, citizen or foreign, from the age of 5 to the age of 15 (including children whose parents are undocumented immigrants). Thus, school authorities are obliged to enroll foreign students and Roma children even if they do not have the necessary documents, such as school certificates or birth certificates that are required for enrolment.

Nonetheless, research suggests that Roma children are not well integrated into the public school system and tend to have higher drop out rates than the majority, while migrant children overall perform less well than their peers. In effect, although 10% of the total school population is foreign, a coherent intercultural education policy remains lacking.

The challenge for Greek schools with high numbers of migrant or Roma pupils is to avoid becoming a 'ghetto'- an 'all migrants' school', as this essentially means a school of 'low educational quality'. Although **discussions are framed around the need to maintain high schooling standards, in reality this constitutes a politically correct discourse that disguises a strong ethnic prejudice**; according to this, migrant children lead to a lowering of school standards due to linguistic limitations, or because they are 'troublemakers'. In other words. While ethnic diversity is tolerated in schools it is not positively appreciated by Greek majority parents, pupils and teachers.

RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY IN GREEK SCHOOLS

Greek Orthodox faith, the country's majority religion, has a dominant and rather uncontested presence in Greek schools. In effect, majority religion classes are taught regularly, morning prayer is a compulsory practice, and religious symbols (such as crucifixes and icons) decorate the overwhelming majority of classrooms and teachers' offices. Students can be exempted from the religion class upon their parents' request. However, no alternative religious courses are offered and research suggests that quite often, migrant children do not wish to be

exempted in order to avoid 'standing out' or being labeled as 'different' from their classmates. This context essentially offers a **minimal expression of liberal tolerance** towards students of other or of no religious affiliation. In effect, even though the school population has become ethnically and religiously diverse to a rather unprecedented extent, there is a lack of accommodation of minority religions (no acceptance/ respect policies).

Parents and teachers interviewed in the course of our research expressed a wide range of views about religious diversity and how it can be accommodated in the school environment. They ranged from a basic minimal conception of tolerance to a pro active acceptance and respect of religious diversity. In many cases, multiculturalist views were expressed along with the conviction that a more civic model of education would be more appropriate.

We thus noted that even though ethnic prejudices may be rather widespread, citizens are not solely attached to the traditional definition of identity projected through national education. In effect, **we discerned efforts to develop new understandings on how to deal with the changing socio-cultural reality of Greek society, high levels of acceptance of religious diversity in schools, and support for a more positive accommodation of such diversity** (e.g. offering alternative religion classes and the possibility for a prayer room for minority religions).

This expression of acceptance can be rooted in the fact that an individual cherishes their own religion and culture and hence see it as logical that immigrants should be respected in their cultural and religious diversity. Openness towards diversity stems from a national tradition of an ethno-cultural conception of identity, rather than from a set of civic values about the intrinsic value of cultural pluralism.

TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE OF RELIGIOUS AND ETHNIC DIVERSITY IN GREEK PUBLIC LIFE

Greece's majority religion is largely uncontested in public life as officially, 98% of the country's citizens (9.9 million according to the 2011 census data) adhere at least nominally to the Greek Orthodox faith. However, the religious composition of the country's non-citizen population of approx. 900,000, according to the 2011 census is unknown. The Greek state has adopted a **passive policy with regard to accommodating the religious needs of its diverse immigrant population**: informal prayer rooms and meeting places are tolerated but not officially recognized nor protected.

There is in principle a standard process through which minority religious groups can apply for a permission to establish a formal place for worship. In practice, however the issuing and gathering of necessary documentation for the operation of worship places can cause endless delays and denial of granting a license.

Indeed, no official mosque operates in Athens, where most practicing Muslim immigrants reside. Muslim migrants pray in informal prayer rooms, which are tolerated by native citizens and the authorities. The challenges raised by migration-related religious diversity has only recently become an issue in public life.

It is pertinent to note here, that so far, racist attacks are not reported as being directed against religious minority individuals (or groups of people) because of their faith. They form part of the generally rising anti-immigrant sentiment during the last few years, and target people looking foreign, including particularly Asian or sub Saharan Africans.

Greece has an **inadequate anti-racist legislation**, there is no official data on racist crimes and

authorities rarely report crimes as being racially motivated. This already challenging institutional and legal framework deteriorated further as the Greek financial crisis unfolded after 2009 while flows of irregular migrants and asylum seekers from Asia and Africa have continued. In this context, mainstream political discourse presented irregular migration as the foremost risk for Greek society and anti-immigrant discourse quickly escalated into racist actions. In effect, along with the wider societal unrest and state of anomie, protest and violence that defined public life in 2011-2012, anti-immigrant discourse flared along with the far right's spectacular rise. Increasing acts of violence were inadequately handled (or even mishandled) by police, judiciary and national authorities. The situation has deteriorated dramatically particularly after the neo-nazi Golden Dawn party entered Greek parliament in the June 2012 elections with a shocking 7% of the national vote. Over these past months, anti-immigrant violence has escalated further, often tolerated by part of the political establishment and public opinion.

Through the research we conducted in ACCEPT Pluralism, we discerned a frequent, but also rather superficial reference to liberal values, such as democracy, equality and autonomy. Expressions of intolerance and racism were easily justified and even defended, without understanding this as a contradiction. This contradiction stems from the dominant Greek nationalism discourse which considers that life in the country in general is "naturally organized" around a basic dichotomy between "us" the nation and "them", the foreigners, the Others. Seen this way, conflicts between migrants and natives are to be expected and diversity is unavoidably perceived as a potential problem.

The current crisis and austerity context transforms racism into "an act of self-defense", and "migrant others" are de-legitimised as holders of even the most basic human rights. Through this discourse, **exclusion, inequality, intolerance, even racist violence can be justified when what is at stake is the perceived interest or well being of the national in-group.** Thus, certain dimensions of the **far right ideology that has burgeoned in Greece today is not** the result of a radical shift in the attitudes and actions of a part of the country's population (as is frequently presented in media and political discourse); rather, **it is rooted in conceptions of nationhood that take ethnic hierarchy relations** and a Manichaeistic view of the world as naturally divided between Us and Them, for granted.

ON TOLERANCE AND INTOLERANCE

Current xenophobic and racist attitudes in the country are **part of a wider backlash of intolerance all over Europe**, where intolerant positions towards minorities are introduced as **liberal concerns** about individual autonomy, citizens' rights and secular European democracies. **Liberalism as a set of values acts throughout Europe empowers the majorities over the minorities in the name of nationalism. This way, intolerance enters through the backdoor as a legitimate option for a democratic nation state.**

Tolerance is not a static value belonging to a civic tradition of citizenship; it is a dynamic concept that can take different forms depending on each society's circumstances. **Expressions of tolerance do not suggest retreating from national traditions**, rather they build upon these traditions so as to create new forms of minimal tolerance or more pro-active accommodation of minority claims.

Minimal Tolerance is not neutral but rather goes hand in hand with a tacit assumption that there is a majority culture and religion that provides for the blueprint as regards cultural and religious matters in schools and public life in general. In this context, the absence of any acceptance or respect policies and measures eventually **leads not to liberal freedom of choice but rather to pressures for cultural and religious assimilation.**

Minimal tolerance becomes irrelevant under emergency circumstances and is suspended due to acute economic and social crisis. Even though the discourse and actions of far right parties is publically criticised, expressions of **intolerance towards diversity becomes part of mainstream politics**, are tolerated by political establishment and public opinion. In the present state of severe crisis, expressions of intolerance are seen by some as a way to restore normality through acting in the name of the (liberal) rights of the national majority. Even if a considerable part of society is more or less actively resisting xenophobia and acts in the name of minorities' rights, however, intolerant ideas and actions are gaining ground in both politics and public life. This form of **racism towards the 'other' is thus neither an aberration of national identity** (but embedded in specific traditions of nationhood) nor **an exception to the rule of modern European democracy** (but part of backlash of intolerance across the continent).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In March 2010, the Greek Parliament voted a **new law on citizenship and naturalization** that transformed Greek citizenship from the 3rd most exclusionary of all European countries to the European norm. Measures aimed at restricting citizenship have since been debated along with measures aimed at fighting irregular immigration. In November 2012, the Council of State declared the law unconstitutional and on the following day the Prime Minister asked for the law to be repealed- meaning restoring the previous *jus sanguinis* principle. This case of failed reform reveals how expressions of intolerance are endorsed and mainstreamed in national policies and rhetoric. Confining Greek citizenship to ethnic descent considerations **puts social cohesion at stake and runs counter to the very interests of those – the 'true nationals' that it presumes to 'protect'.**

As regards the country's educational policy, all children, irrespective of whether they belong to the migrant or minority communities or the majority population, must be equipped with knowledge and communication skills to be able to deal with an increasingly diverse classroom and society at large. It is important that the national education system recognizes the experiences of migrant children through a new **more civically oriented citizenship ethos**. For that to happen, there is a need for a renewed emphasis on citizenship and civic education that introduces the concepts of diversity, citizenship, tolerance, acceptance, respect for ethnic and religious diversity, and that combats ethnic prejudice and racism. The important role that emigration and immigration has played in the recent history of Greece and Europe should be acknowledged, endorsed and appreciated.

Finally, in view of the spectacular rise of the far right, the fight against discrimination and intolerance needs to become a top priority for policy makers. Authorities must **deal with racist violence**, including police misconduct. This does not require in practice additional funds, but improvement of the institutional and legal framework, restructuring of priorities and actually a political will to safeguard democracy and equality in the country.

A series of drastic measures should be considered that would include the establishment of a system of monitoring racist crimes, the prosecution of those public officials who abuse their authority, the strengthening of the role of the Equality Body by making it independent and giving it appropriate human and material resources to implement information campaigns.

It is therefore urgent to **adopt a national action plan against xenophobia and racism concerning public life, culture and the media**. This may include, for instance, media awareness raising campaigns, educational projects in schools in cooperation with migrant associations, training of public administration desk officers on cultural diversity; mainstreaming teacher training on intercultural education in existing University courses; making intercultural education integral part of the curriculum of all schools.

FURTHER READINGS

To read more on the research findings presented here, see:

Tolerance and Cultural Diversity Discourses and Practices in Greece

By Anna Triandafyllidou and Hara Kouki (EUI)

Download your copy from:

<http://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/23261>

Other relevant publications include:

2012/02.2. Handbook on Tolerance and Diversity in Europe

Anna Triandafyllidou (EUI)

Download your copy from:

<http://www.accept-pluralism.eu/Research/ProjectReports/Handbook.aspx>

	PROJECT IDENTITY
Acronym	ACCEPT PLURALISM
Title	Tolerance, Pluralism and Social Cohesion: Responding to the Challenges of the 21st Century in Europe
Short Description	<p>ACCEPT PLURALISM questions how much cultural diversity can be accommodated within liberal and secular democracies in Europe. The notions of tolerance, acceptance, respect and recognition are central to the project. ACCEPT PLURALISM looks at both native and immigrant minority groups.</p> <p>Through comparative, theoretical and empirical analysis the project studies individuals, groups or practices for whom tolerance is sought but which we should not tolerate; of which we disapprove but which should be tolerated; and for which we ask to go beyond toleration and achieve respect and recognition.</p> <p>In particular, we investigate when, what and who is being not tolerated / tolerated / respected in 15 European countries; why this is happening in each case; the reasons that different social actors put forward for not tolerating / tolerating / respecting specific minority groups/individuals and specific practices.</p> <p>The project analyses practices, policies and institutions, and produces key messages for policy makers with a view to making European societies more respectful towards diversity.</p>
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